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Elizabethan society: a sketch.



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# Elizabethan Society: A Sketch

BY

J. B. BLACK

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## ELIZABETHAN SOCIETY—A SKETCH.

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ELIZABETHAN England is like a harvested field whose crops have long since been garnered by armies of unpretentious, industrious, and well-equipped scholars. The fruits of their labours lie in that superb granary of Elizabethan gleanings—the New Shakespeare Text Society publications. For the belated labourer little now remains but the dusty footprints of his predecessors and an occasional derelict straw. Even the task of summing up the research of a generation has successfully been accomplished in the two splendid volumes recently issued by the Clarendon Press.\* Consequently it is to be doubted if anything new can be said, either by way of fresh discovery or by way of a synthesis of existing materials. Nevertheless, there are features, aspects and contrasts in the multi-coloured life of the time which will bear restatement and possibly gain by it. To the historian, who labours sombrely at the treadmill of political and constitutional documents, and writes, so to speak, with an eye on Magna Carta all the time, an escape into the popular *Forum* of the London streets, where politics were at a discount, is a bracing tonic and at the same time a corrective to overmuch abstraction.

Historically speaking, the politics of the masses are almost always simple and uninvolved, because as a rule, the bulk of men accept the social and political order prescribed for them. In the so-called "spacious days" of the 16th century they were exceptionally simple. The multitudes who thronged the streets of Elizabethan London, or congregated in the theatres, bear-gardens and Paul's Walk, cannot by any possibility be termed a fiery breed of men who spent their days in theological and political disputation. Indeed it is to be doubted whether they had at any time more than a passing and spectacular interest in the larger issues of Church and State, and the absorbing problems of government. Schisms and plots might keep Burghley and Walsingham awake o' nights, and occasionally drive the Queen into paroxysms of

\**Shakespeare's England*, Oxford, 1916.

hysteria: these commotions in the royal boudoir, or Council Chamber, were looked upon as the inevitable afflictions of crowned heads, and of the grave men to whom was committed the task of piloting the ship of state into port: they seldom influenced the mental environment of the street, or darkened the path of the plain man. He was content to take his religion and political beliefs on trust from his superiors; and when he attended a "hanging, drawing and quartering" at Tower Hill, or stood by to hear the government proclamations at Paul's Cross, he did so, much in the same spirit as when he paid his ten doits to see a dead Indian, or gazed open-mouthed after Shan O'Neill's motley bodyguard of wild Ulstermen: that is—he marvelled at, and accepted it all, as part of the diurnal process of Nature. That this is not an exaggerated description of the mentality of the age, may be seen from the following remarkable words of an observant Venetian, then resident in London. The example and authority of the Sovereign are everything," he writes, . . . "and they would make themselves Jews or Mahometans according as the prince would demand or adopt." In any case, however we may account for it, the fact remains that in the crowded thoroughfares and popular resorts of the capital, where all classes met and jostled, the prevailing tone was essentially objective, exuberant, sanguine, and uncritical. "Puritan" and "papist"—terms that embody in themselves the whole firmament of differences between Geneva and Rome, were after all only relative, and both were summed up in the absolute term "patriot." The typical Englishman of the period was not a party man, but a Queen's man, a devoted supporter of royalty and a passionate worshipper even of its faults. On what other ground may we account for the obvious popularity of that "artistic abortion"—the History Play—except that it brought the panoplied kings and nobility of England on the common stage to blare out the threadbare jingoism of the day? Then, again, what event in the civic annals can be compared in popularity with the royal "progress" from Westminster to the Tower? The plain fact is, everyone had the good of the nation at heart. From that acrid and boldest of puritans, John Stubbs, who had his right hand chopped off for inditing a pamphlet against the Queen's threatened



French marriage, to the intrepid jesuit martyr, Edmund Campion, whose preaching was deemed to be destructive of the State—all who suffered or died during the reign for conscience sake or for so-called political crimes, did so with a prayer for their country and a salutation to Elizabeth on their lips. Clearly the immense personal popularity of the Queen dwarfed everything else. She was “the most English woman in England,” the modern “Jephthah, judge and restorer of Israel”, the pledge and security of national greatness.

Of course this cult of the Queen had other than purely psychological and sentimental grounds. The test to which any government in modern times is submitted, and by which it stands or falls, is essentially a practical one. Does it secure the necessary conditions for a full and free expansion of the creative and productive energies of the nation? In other words, internal peace, freedom, and economic prosperity are the criteria which the average man, as a rule, applies to government policy, and in terms of which he applauds or condemns. Popularity is a matter of opinion, not of principle. Now, in Elizabeth’s day these conditions, on the whole, were amply fulfilled. Never before had the commercial and industrial classes enjoyed so prodigious a prosperity: never in its history did the country feel so free from civil broils; and never was the feeling of military superiority to other nations so strongly marked. An old Armada couplet sums up the widespread optimism:—

“We’ll not give up our *Credo* for pope, nor book, nor bell;

“*And if the Devil himself should come, we’ll hound him back to hell.*”

To distil poetry out of economic prosperity must be a surpassingly difficult task: nevertheless the apparent peace and plenty of the times gave many a limping rhymester his cue for tiresome adulations of the food supply. In one of these crude compositions England is compared to “the kernel of the nut”, and surrounding nations to “the shell”. The bard proceeds:—

“Here things are cheap and easily had:”

“No soil the like can show:”

“No State nor Kingdom at this day”

“Doth in such plenty flow.”

The pope might launch his thunderbolts of anathema and excommunication against the *pretensa Angliae regina*: he could not interfere with the steady forward movement of economic forces. Like foolish Balaam, to whom Bishop Jewel ventured to compare him in 1570, he "cursed the people of God," but his curses were turned to blessing; and "the more he cursed, the more England prospered." "Thanks be to God," wrote the worthy bishop, "never was it better in worldly peace, in health of body, and in abundance of corn and victuals." Or, as another anonymous poet put it:—

"God, for her, doth clothe ye ground with store  
Of plenty and increase:  
Our barns are full, and barks can bear no more,  
And blessed are we with peace."

Surely an unanswerable argument to the prognosticators of evil and an infallible support for the optimism of society! High Heaven had written its approval like an apocalypse across the face of the country.

Such, then, was the atmosphere in which the vocal classes of Elizabethan England lived and moved and had their being. But there are other factors to be considered, which modify in detail this somewhat roseate picture. It was an age of unlimited self-expression—"robustious," ostentatious, licentious. Literature, social custom, dress, and mode of living, were merely the glasses in which the egoism of all classes reflected and admired itself. At the same time "covetousness" and a mad scramble for wealth were fashionable vices to which everyone was addicted. Each trade had its own special way of "pilling and polling" the public, and even the professions were no whit behind in the desire to grow rich quickly. Under the strain of this unbridled greed, the traditional social restrictions—the old tripartite division of society, of which medieval writers speak—broke down irremediably. Men were no longer categorised according to their calling and function in the State, but according to their possession or non-possession of wealth. A cash *nexus* and a proletariat made their simultaneous appearance. The reign of Elizabeth represents the transition period, when men had not yet adjusted themselves mentally to the new conditions, when the government was still fumbling about for a solution of the



new problem of pauperism, and when all who possessed the wherewithal of enjoyment disowned responsibility to the poor. Beneath his brilliant exterior, the Elizabethan Englishman concealed very imperfectly a callous and cruel heart.

But let us first consider the brighter side of the social drama. It is customary to regard the latter part of Elizabeth's reign as the most poetic period in the history of England. "The quaint mystery of mounting conceit which surpasseth all the invention and elocution in the world," could only express itself adequately in the wingèd words of poetry. Thus Wm. Webb wrote that "among the innumerable sorts of English books, and infinite fardels of printed pamphlets wherewith this country is pestered, every shop stuffed and every study furnished: the greatest part, I think, in any one kind, are such as are mere (i.e. *pure*) poetical or which tend in some respect (as either in matter or form) to poetry." But prose overflowed into poetry in other directions than literature. The "mounting conceit" of the artist in clothes revolutionised the old sartorial proprieties of the middle ages; and, according to Camden, "this apish nation became mad with a rage for apparell, displaying a certain deformity and insolency of mind, jetting up and down in silks glittering with gold and silver." London, which had by this time become the metropolis and emporium of northern Europe, where all nations and fashions rubbed shoulders, cast off its medieval rags, donning the colours and gaiety of an Italian city. "Forty years ago," writes Stafford, "there were not twelve haberdashers in London who sold fancy caps, glasses, swords, daggers, girdles; and now from the Tower to Westminster Abbey every street is full of them, and their shops glitter and shine of glass as well drinking as looking: yea all manner of vessels of the same stuff, painted cruses, gay daggers, knives, swords and girdles, that it is able to make any temperate man to gaze on them to long somewhat, though it serve to no purpose necessary." The Thames, greatest of Elizabethan commercial arteries, proved no less an endless source of wonder to native and foreigner alike: its forest of masts and bunting was symbolic of England's prosperity. "C'est chose magnifique," wrote De Maisse (French ambassador), "de voir la quantité de vaisseaux qui sont à l'ancre telle-

ment *que deux lieux durant vous ne voyez autre chose que vaisseaux . . .*” But the psychology of the nation was the most startling feature in the situation. The craving for luxuries in every shape and form had become a disease. It did not matter that all the “glitter and shine” was paid for dearly in good coin of the realm, or by the export of valuable raw materials. “Fools,” wrote the stern economist, “by means of this rage for foreign trash drain England annually of £100,000!” Nor could the puritan satirist, who castigated the garish tastes of society with the fury of a Juvenal, arrest the headlong desire to spend. The rage for new things was insatiable. “Nothing is so constant,” wrote Harrison, “as inconstancy in attire.” “They be desirous of new-fangles,” wrote Stubbs, “praising things past, condemning things present, and coveting things to come.” Fynes Moryson, who had travelled more extensively than most men of the time, thought his own countrymen more sumptuous than the Persians—“because they affect all extremes.” It was not the rich merchant and professional classes alone who flaunted their finery, their “silks, velvets and chains of gold,” before the public eye. All who could scrape together the necessary money, followed suit—farmer, peasant, and artisan—even although it often drove them into beggary to do so. Many were the satirical comments on the vanity and presumption of the lower strata of society: the “dunghill drudges” and “presumptuous asses,” as Green calls them, who did not scruple to “wear on their feet what Kings have worn on their heads,” and “drowned themselves in the mercer’s book” for the sake of being “clapped in a velvet pantoufle.” Lodge, in “Wit’s Miserie” gives a pretty picture of the ravages of fashion in the country. “The ploughman,” he writes, “that in times past, was content in his russet, must nowadays have his doublet of the fashion with wide cuts, his garters of fine silk of Granada, to meet his Sis on Sunday. The farmer that was contented in times past with his russet frock and mockado sleeves, now sells a cow against Easter to buy new silken gear for his credit.” To become a “court noll” and an “accomplished gentleman” was a most expensive business. Ben Jonson satirically counsels all who aim at such to give over living in the country and hie themselves to the city, “where

on your first appearance 'twere good you turned four or five hundred acres of your best land into two or three trunks of apparell!"

Naturally a "Babylonian confusion" of classes ensued: the social world turned itself topsy-turvy. Bankrupts, players, and cut-purses strutted about in gentleman's attire, and it was impossible to say from the "mingle-mangle" of dress who was noble, worshipful, gentle or even a yeoman. "To such outrage is it grown nowadays," writes the indignant Stubbs, "every butcher, shoemaker, tailer, cobbler, husbandman, and others: yea every tinker, pedlar, and swineherd, and every artificer and other *gregarii ordinis* of the vilest sort of men must be called by the vain name of masters at every turn."

Contemporary writers are never tired of expatiating on the highly artificial and bizarre nature of Elizabethan costume, the multiplicity of dresses, and the whimsical character of public taste. In the "Seven Deadly Sins of London," Dekker picturesquely assembles (or distributes) the male costume thus: "The Englishman's dress is like a traitor's body, that hath been hanged, drawn, and quartered, and is set up in various places: his cod-piece is in Denmark, the collar of his doublet and the belly in France: the wing and narrow sleeve in Italy: the short waist hangs over a Dutch butcher's stall in Utrecht: his huge stops speak Spanishly . . . And thus we that mock every nation for keeping of one fashion yet steal patches from every one of them to piece out our pride." The Book of Homilies, issued in 1562 for the use of the pulpit, is perhaps a more reliable source of information than any other; but here too the same note of wild extravagance is struck. In one of the sermons, entitled "Excess of Apparell," we read that it was customary for men to keep a rich variety of gowns (cloaks)—one for the day and one for the night, one for summer and one for winter, one through-furred and one only faced, one for the working day and one for the holy day, one of cloth and another of silk or damask, one for dinner and another after, one of Spanish fashion and another of Turkish, etc. "Therefore," continues the homilist, "a certain man that would picture every countryman in his accustomed apparel, when he painted other nations, he pictur-

ed the Englishman all naked and gave him cloth under his arm and bade him make it himself as he knew best, for he changed his fashion so often that he knew not how to make it." An old wood-cut is actually extant, representing this naked, whimsical Englishman. With a pair of tailor's shears in his hand and a roll of cloth under his arm, he gives utterance to the following doggerel:

"I am an Englishman, and naked I stand here,  
 "Musing in my mind what raiment I shall wear;  
 "For now I will wear this and now I will wear that;  
 "Now I will wear I cannot tell what."

No less noteworthy than the decorative treatment of dress was the minute attention paid to the hair, beard and moustache. The London *coiffeur* indeed rivalled the tailor in the new and startling "cuts" he purveyed, and the wealth of his perfumes, unguents and powders. Thus in the same way as the old-fashioned simple garb of the Middle Ages vanished before the onslaught of the new sartorial fashions, the "rank" medieval "Christ's Cut" which gave the head the appearance of "a Holland cheese"—as if it had been "cut round by a dish," fell out of use before the more pretentious and picturesque styles of Italy, France and Spain. Apparently many men affected the Italian manner, "short and round and frounced with curling irons so as to look like a half moon in a mist": others aped the Spaniard's predilection for wearing the hair "long at the ears and curled"; but not a few were captivated with the French love-lock, drooping on the shoulders, "where you may wear your mistress' favour." Of course the beard and moustache received the same delicate and careful attention, "almost changing the accidents into the substance." The former might be "short and sharp amiable like an inamorato" or "broad pendant like a spade to be terrible like a warrior and a soldado," while the latter was, as a rule, "fostered about the ears like the branches of a vine," or "cut down to the lip in the Italian fashion." But the barber was essentially an artist at his trade, capable of suiting his technique to the physiognomy of his client. "And therefore," wrote Harrison, "if a man have a lean and straight face, a Marquess Otto's cut will make it broad and large: if it be platter-like, a long slender beard will make it seem narrower:

if he be weasel-beaked, then much hair left on the cheeks will make its owner look big like a bowdled hen, and as grim as a goose, if Cornelis of Chelmsford say true."

It should not be imagined, however, that all this apparent effeminacy involved any real softening of the fibre of the race. It was not merely a richly dressed and highly perfumed but a "militant civility" that paraded the London streets. Every man from the age of eighteen bore some kind of lethal weapon—a sword, rapier, or dagger, possibly both rapier and dagger. "Desperate cutters," says Harrison, carried two daggers or two rapiers, "wherewith in drunken fray they are known to work much mischief." Even the labouring man in the country had his sword, buckler and bow by his side, except when actually working in the fields, when he laid them down in a convenient corner. Apprentices, too, had their knives, parsons their "hangers" or daggers, and ladies their bodkins. It appears to have been the tendency of the *arme blanche* to grow steadily longer, for in 1580 the government was compelled to issue a proclamation restricting the length of swords to three feet, and daggers to twelve inches, inclusive of the handle! Obviously street fighting must have been a common occurrence and a serious menace to public order. The Elizabethan swashbuckler was prepared to throw away his life for a comparatively small matter. In Ascham's words, he had "a factious heart, a discoursing head and a mind to meddle in all men's affairs." Mercutio's taunt to Benvolio shows him in action: "Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes . . . thou hast quarrelled with a man for coughing in the street because he hath wakened thy dog that hath been asleep in the sun."

"Secular" and "mundane" are the words one would naturally apply to Elizabethan society; and on the whole the attributes are just. It is only necessary to consider the places of fashionable resort, where all classes ventilated their opinions and sunned themselves, in order to be convinced of this fact. St. Pauls, the theatre, and the bear-garden each represent a facet of the variegated life of the period, and in all three cases the atmosphere was essentially the same—of the earth, earthy. St. Pauls, intimately associated with all the epoch-

making pronouncements of the Reformation since the days of the Henrician Settlement, suffered in Elizabeth's reign from the general desecration of church buildings. In vain the Homilies enjoined the preservation of sobriety and decorum within the sacred precincts: the Cathedral had become, like other famous churches, "a house of talking, of walking, of brawling, of minstrelsy, of hawks and of dogs." From being a house of prayer, it was now, in the expressive phrase of the Hómilist, "a den of thieves." The middle aisle, commonly known as 'Duke Humphrey's walk,' or 'Paul's Walk,' was the daily scene of a veritable pandemonium. A place of business, it was also a convenient rendez-vous for the gallants, wits, and the riff-raff of the streets. Here too gathered the idle gentlewomen of the Capital. "After dinner," says Stubbs, "their bodies being satisfied and their heads prettily mizzled with wine, they walk abroad for a time, or else confer with their familiars . . . or they sit at their doors to show their beauty and behold passers-by. Weary of this they take a walk into town," etc. In one corner of the Cathedral stood the lawyers "at the pillars," to receive their clients: while in another, hawkers exposed their wares, and indulged freely in their various street cries. Even the tombs and font were utilised as counters for the payment and receipt of accounts. "Lordless men" paraded the nave, offering their services for hire. And to increase the general confusion, horses and mules were led through the Cathedral as a short cut, profaning the place with filth. Outside, in the churchyard, was the book market of London. As many as twenty book-stalls, representing the leading publishing houses, clustered close up against the walls. Often the vaults of the sacred buildings were used to store the superfluous literature. Here, under the very eye of the clerical authorities, the 'merry' books of Italy were sold; and here also Shakespeare probably bought the Italian Romances that form the basis of so many of his plays.

In the Theatre, the same secular and mundane spirit prevailed. The Elizabethan was nothing if not spectacular. Just as he loved pomp and show in his dress, loud colours and bizarre effects; so in the Theatre he delighted in the appeal to the senses, strong contrasts, and declamation. The at-

traction of Marlowe's "mighty line" was irresistible. It would be wrong, of course, to say that he failed to discriminate the higher artistic values represented in a Shakespearean tragedy; but it should be remembered that Shakespearean plays were the culmination rather than the habitual level of the dramatic art of the time. The average taste of the theatre audience was on a lower plane; for the Elizabethan play often staged scenes that would revolt the modern public—scenes portraying madness, drunkenness, vice, and brutality, that appear to us to be no fit subject for Art at all. Yet this must have been a considerable attraction to the bulk of the apprentices, mechanics, and artisan class, who patronised the theatre. The obvious fact is that the popularity of the stage lay in its direct appeal to the senses. Just as it was the 'rough and tumble' at Paris Garden that delighted the mob—the 'clawing', 'roaring', 'tugging', 'tossing', and 'tumbling', of the bears, and the 'nimbleness' of the dogs; so too it was the vehemence of the action, the license of expression and sentiment, the brilliant declamation, and the fine dresses of the actors, that charmed the playgoers. Stubbs for all his bitterness, was not very wide of the mark when he wrote the following malicious passage: "The argument of tragedies is anger, wrath, cruelty, incest, murder; the persons and actors are gods, goddesses, furies, fiends, hags, kings, queens and potentates. Of comedies, the matter and ground is love, bawdry, cosinage, flattery, whoredom, adultery; the persons or agents, whores, queans, bawds, scullions, knaves, courtesans, lecherous old men, amorous young men."

On a public holiday like Shrovetide, when a horde of apprentices and artisans was let loose on the city, and flocked to the Theatre, the disorder must have been great. The fact that the theatre areas were outside the direct control of the city fathers—at Finsbury, Newington Butts, Southwark—made the playhouse a kind of safety-valve for all the pent-up humours of society. "Hell is broke loose," wrote Haslewood, "and it is good to draw all the devils into one place, so that we may know what the people do and find them if need be." Indecency among the audience was quite a common occurrence, owing, probably, to the free mingling of the sexes in the pit, and the fact that there was no proper control of the



crowd. On the stage it was not uncommon, and had to be guarded against by the female part of the audience, by the use of masks: there being no other protection. Yet it would give an utterly false impression of the drama of this period if we did not make allowance for the difficulties under which the play-house laboured. It was an outcast and pariah, banned from the city to the no-man's land beyond the walls,—and identified by the puritan with all the vices and disorders of the age. Nevertheless in spite of obloquy it was the truest mirror of public taste and opinion of its day, and its amorphous audiences could rise to the dizzy heights of appreciation demanded by a Shakespearean tragedy!

The prevailing moral and intellectual tone of this picturesque and vivacious society was (as we should expect,, singularly free and unrestrained. No heed was paid to the accepted standards of the past, nor was there any regard shewn for the admonitions of moralist or homilist. Not only was the pulpit studiously ignored in its efforts to stem the tide of blasphemy, immorality and public vice of every description; even lay critics like Stubbs were pilloried by the wits as vain fools. "They speak," writes Nash, "as though they had been brought up all the days of their life with bread and water . . . as though they had been eunuchs from their cradle, or blind from the hour of their conception." Of course, the events of the previous generation, the vast doctrinal changes, the extensive secularisation of Church property, the growing discredit of religion, contributed greatly to the atmosphere of atheism and epicurism in which the Elizabethan lived, and moved, and had his being. The unsettlement of belief, combined with the unprincipled struggle for wealth, prepared the soil for the seeds of materialism and a frankly hedonist view of life. But the scape goat of the times, the 'whipping boy' of society, on whom all the sins of the nation were visited, was the Italianate Englishman. "The devil incarnate" in Italy, he was regarded as the corrupter of morals at home. "Thou comest," wrote Green, "not alone, but accompanied with a multitude of abominable vices hanging on thy bombast, nothing but infectious abuses, and vainglory, self-love, sodomy, and strange poisonings, wherewith thou hast infected this glorious isle." Ascham terms the whole

class "Knights of Circe," "Epicures in living," "Atheists in doctrine." They were the patrons and advocates of the Italian novel, and the other questionable books of the period. Every critic, clerical and lay, complained bitterly of the increasing vogue of these 'merry' tales. "We have heresy and blasphemy and paganism and bawdry committed to the press," cried Deringe, a Court preacher; "there is no Italian tale so scurrilous, or fable so odious, or action so abominable, but some have ventured to defend the same." Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, and the other medieval heroes fell into disrepute before the triumphant popularity of the new 'Courts of Venus' and 'Castles of Love' introduced by the enterprising booksellers from abroad. "Yet," says Ascham, "ten Morte Arthures do not the tenth part so much harm as one of these books made in Italy and translated in England." No wonder the pulpit complained of the decay of true religion—of "godly preaching heard without remorse," of "fastings kept without affliction," of "almsgiving without compassion," and of "lent holden without discipline." "It were better to be a piper or a filthy minstrel," said one ecclesiastic, "than a divine; for the one is heard for his ribaldry, the other hated for his gravity, wisdom and sobriety."

We turn now to a consideration of the reverse side of the shield. Balancing the brilliant display of Elizabethan Society, there was a growing slough of unemployment, poverty and misery among the lower classes. All writers of the time refer to it. Of course the causes were numerous and varied: a proletariat is not born in a day. A general 'dearth' or rise in prices, traced by Stafford to the debasement of the coinage of Henry VIII, and to the influx of American silver, placed the necessities of life almost beyond the reach of the very poor. The turning of arable land into pasture—a favourite plan of the land-owner who found wool more valuable than corn from the point of view of commerce—and the consequent decay of agriculture, which it brought about, both cut down the supply of corn and turned many country labourers adrift. It was calculated on this head alone that, as early as 1550, some 50,000 ploughs were idle in England, and 300,000 persons dependent on them were thrown out of employment. "When gentlemen became sheep-mongers and graziers,"

writes one critic, "neither cloth nor victuals could be had at a reasonable price." Enclosures of the common lands, moors, heaths, etc., where the poor were wont to pasture their cattle and grow the corn on which they depended as the staff of life, also counted for a considerable amount of the hardship of the time. Sometimes the encloser would argue that the older form of agriculture was wasteful and unprofitable. A few of them went as far as to say that "a superfluous augmentation of mankind" was not to be encouraged, because it led to the increase of beggars! But the immediate result of their policy was not to lessen the problem of pauperism: rather to increase it. Stubbs was inclined to think that early and improvident marriages were also largely responsible for the creation of a pauper class. "They build up a cottage," he writes, "though but of elder poles in every lane end, where they live as beggars all their life. This filleth the land with such store of poor people that in short time (except some caution be provided to prevent the same) it is like to grow to great poverty and scarceness." No doubt, too, another source of the problem was the destruction of the monasteries, because the monastic institutions, whatever their spiritual condition may have been, were at least indulgent landlords, and helped to keep the country-side contented. At all events Nash, Green, and other writers hark back to the happier days, "when abbeys stood and twenty eggs could be had for a penny." The new owners who had supplanted the abbots, writes another critic, "abhor the names of monks, friars, canons, nuns, but their goods they greedily gripe." Undoubtedly also the prevalence of usury contributed to the misery, because "the shittle-witted fools," who lusted after the fashionable dresses of London, often mortgaged their estates and failed to redeem them, sometimes ending their days in prison, where they lay, "gyved and shackled" until their limbs rotted from their bodies." Other causes were rent-racking by covetous landlords; excessive charges by lawyers, who apparently were "troubled by a heat of the liver, which makes their palms so hot, that to cold them they must be rubbed with the oil of *angels*," and finally, "forestalling and regrating" by merchants, who "intercept everything before it comes to market."

Whatever the direct and immediate cause in particular

cases may have been, the dimensions of the pauper class soon assumed appalling proportions, and no one was prepared to shoulder responsibility. State action was in embryo, while the old medieval view that charity was an individual duty, based on love to God and pity to man, had lost its savour. Social critics, who saw the condition of the country at close quarters, say very little about the possibility of alleviation by the Government, but protest volubly against the callous indifference of the wealthy and well-to-do. "A poor man," says Green, "shall as soon break his neck as his fast at a rich man's door." So numerous were the poor of London that they slept in porches, stalls, doorways, sheep-cotes, haylofts, and died like dogs. "They lie in the streets," writes Stubbs, "upon pallets of straw, and well if they have that, or else in the dirt as commonly it is seen, having neither house to put their heads in, covering to keep them from the cold, nor to hide their shame withal . . . but are permitted to die in the streets like dogs or beasts *without any mercy or compassion showed to them at all.*" The hospitals, lazaret-houses and spittals, according to another critic, could not cope with one-hundredth part of the infirm and diseased—"and many lay dead without the walls for want of succour."\*

It is well to take these facts into account when we perorate on the "spacious days," and rhapsodise on the imaginative brilliance of Elizabethan genius. The Englishman of the 16th Century cannot be credited with a soft heart towards his unfortunates. For all his intellectual greatness, his moral sympathies were no further advanced than those of a savage. Materialism, greed, the unprincipled scramble for wealth, blinded him to everything resembling social duty. The poor were a nuisance and poverty a disease, for which, in the inscrutable providence of God, he was not responsible.

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\*NOTE: As we are dealing in this paper entirely with the mental attitude of Elizabethan society, and not with government policy, I have intentionally omitted to consider the governmental measures devised to cope with the problem of pauperism.



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